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Data from Dave McLean:

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<u>Major General Chester V. (Ted) Clifton, Jr.</u>	- - Military Aid to President Kenedy
<u>General Nathan F. Twining, UAAF</u>	- - Chairman, JCS 1957 - 1960
<u>General Lyman L. Limnitzer, USA</u>	- - Chairman, JCS 1960 - 1962
<u>Admiral Arleigh A. Burke, CNO</u>	
<u>Chester Bowles,</u>	- - UnderSecretary of State

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General Wheeler's Interview by General Clifton for the Kennedy Library Oral History Project - 11 July 1964 meeting.

General Clifton: General Wheeler, will you start out by describing two things. First, your first acquaintance with President Kennedy, and then tell us a little about the impact of the Kennedy Administration on the Directorship of the Joint Staff in the first few months of the Kennedy Administration - January, February, March 1961 - as you recall.

General Wheeler: The first time I met President Kennedy was in September of 1960 prior to the ^{Presidential} election ~~of the Presidency~~. At that time, of course, he had been nominated by the Democratic Party as their candidate. The occasion for this meeting arose in the following manner. President Eisenhower had decided that Senator Kennedy should be given intelligence briefings on all pertinent security matters. In fact, Vice President Nixon ^{had} ~~was~~ ^{been} already given additional briefings other than those he had had as a result of his official position during the Eisenhower Administration. There was a great deal of discussion as to who would brief Senator Kennedy from the military side as opposed to the intelligence briefings given by Mr. Allen Dulles, the head of the CIA, on the purely intelligence aspects of the U.S. position in the world. It was first thought that perhaps the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff - at that time General Nathan Twining of the Air Force - should give this briefing. Then it was proposed that a relatively junior officer of the Joint Staff, perhaps of colonel/captain rank, might give the briefing and finally as a sort of compromise between these two extremes it was determined that I - the Director of the Joint Staff - would head up the briefing team. So in September of 1960, I went to ^{the} ~~an~~ temporary office of Senator Kennedy in the Capitol building, I believe the office of the, what would it be Ted, the office of the

General Clifton: Well, he was running his campaign from his Senatorial office, but he also had rooms over at the Capitol and had just an office they allotted him there.

General Wheeler: That's right, but it came out of some ^{office} ~~of the~~ - I think perhaps the door-keeper of the Senate or someone like that, Master of Arms -

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Gen Clifton: This was in March and April.

Gen Wheeler: This was in April.

Gen Clifton: After it was a failure or before...

Gen Wheeler: On the day that it was failing was the next time that I actually saw him. As I recall it, Gen Lemnitzer, who was then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was on the Hill testifying and a meeting was called very hurriedly in the Cabinet Room. Admiral Burke, who was the second ranking member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was getting prepared to go over and he took me with him so that he would have some backup on various military aspects that might be discussed.

Gen Clifton: And because you were familiar with what the Chairman had been doing pretty specifically.

Gen Wheeler: That's right. So I went over to this meeting which was on the afternoon - I can't remember the date -

Gen Clifton: Probably the 19th of April.

Gen Wheeler: It would have been the 19th of April, about that time.

Gen Clifton: It was certainly after the invasion had been launched that morning.

Gen Wheeler: It was very definite that the operation was going down the drain unless something of a sizeable and perhaps a drastic nature was undertaken. Not too long after Admiral Burke and I arrived in the Cabinet Room, Gen Lemnitzer did come in from the Hill. He had been alerted that this was going on and he was able to excuse himself and leave. There was a sizeable body present on this occasion. Not only the President but the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, Mr. Bowles, the then Director of CIA, Mr. Allen Dulles, came in with Dick Bissel, who had been rather in the directive position on this particular operation. Bissel was tremendously upset. In fact, he could hardly talk coherently at the outset. Now I was struck with the fact that he didn't even so much as have a map with him or anything else. He started telling President Kennedy what the situation was.

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Then there was considerable discussion as to what should be done to correct the situation. I got the impression from President Kennedy's facial reactions, remarks, and so on that he was extremely desirous of doing something to correct the situation and hopefully enable this thing to go. It was made very clear to him that what was wrecking and had wrecked the whole operation was the actions of a couple of ^{T-33's} ~~PA200's~~ ^{aircraft} That this had wrecked the whole thing because there had not been sufficient and timely air support. Without that he said, well, perhaps we ought to put in the Navy air off the carrier which was lying off-shore and from which, by the way, reconnaissance had been flown in order to ascertain what was going on on the beach. There was some discussion about this and he was quite insistent, as I say, that something could be done and that he wanted to do something. I had the very distinct impression that he was going to go ahead and do something. However, after a fairly brief discussion along these lines, he went back into his own office with two or three of his advisers and later came out and said no, that he would not do this - about five or ten minutes later. Now the results of all this were very bad within the Government. At least this was my personal impression. In the first place, I had the very distinct feeling, which lasted for months thereafter, that this failure so early in the Kennedy Administration had had a profound effect upon him, and I know it had a profound effect on many of his advisers in a number of ways. In the first place, it shook their confidence in themselves considerably. In the second place, it started, as I think the newspapers of the day will reflect, back-biting and ~~disension~~ ^{disension} within the upper levels of the Government which caused a great deal of difficulty, I would think, for President Kennedy, although I can't document this. And thirdly, there ^{was} a tendency in many parts of the Government, and this undoubtedly had an impact on President Kennedy, to blame all this on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You will recall that there were, I think, some very carefully leaked pieces that appeared in the Press at that time. And you will also recall that the Joint Chiefs of Staff never made any reply to any of that.

Gen Clifton: Talking about leaks to the press that indicated that President

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Gen Wheeler: This is correct.

Gen Clifton: And rather pointedly sometimes about Gen Lemnitzer.

Gen Wheeler: This is correct.

Gen Clifton: And also, as you were pointing out, in the ensuing months - May, June, July - the Joint Chiefs of Staff individually or collectively never made a defense of their actions in this operation.

Gen Wheeler: No.

Gen Clifton: Of course, as we know for the record, Gen^{eral} Taylor was called in to make an investigation of what went wrong and he has a rather exclusive report on file over there in the President's papers. ^{President} Kennedy's papers. But aside from his report and calling in, when you went back into the Tank with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were they somewhat demoralized?

Gen Wheeler: I think that what hit them the hardest was the fact that they were being blamed for an action over which they had practically no control and in which the military was very little involved. They had no directive authority over this action at all. Now, furthermore, they felt very strongly, and I might add, bitterly, that what military advice they had offered had been ignored; that in the decision-making meetings which preceded the Bay of Pigs affair, no military man was present on numerous occasions. They were particularly bitter in their own attitudes about the fact that the air support which had been planned as an integral part of this operation ^{not} US support but Cuban dissident air support ^{had} had been knocked off without any reference to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In other words, they felt they were being very unfairly blamed publicly, and in a sense pilloried, for a series of events for which they were not responsible.

Gen Clifton: This was planned by a civilian agency.

Gen Wheeler: This is correct.

Gen Clifton: And without much consultation of senior military.

Gen Wheeler: This is correct.

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Gen Clifton: Some junior military were involved.

Gen Wheeler: This is correct, and there was some military support in the way of hardware provided. But there was no planning staff. There had been a review, as you know, of the plan by selected members of the Joint Staff. This review pointed out very clearly, I think, the pros and cons of this particular operation. The basis for success in this operation, as laid down, was that there would be a sizeable and early popular uprising by the Cuban people. And on this assumption -- in other words, if it proved to be true, -- the Joint Staff review group said that with other corrective measures in the area of training, air strikes and other things, ^{such as} ~~the~~ logistics, that the thing had a reasonable chance of success. However, you may or may not know that the lodgment area was changed, the air support was progressively whittled down, and finally eliminated at the last moment, and various important ingredients were pulled out to the point where a couple of training planes were able to wreck the entire operation.

Gen Clifton: There were two points that I know President Kennedy thought this had been subjected to top level scrutiny. One was in November before he took office when it was planned. In this operation as it went along he was assured that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had seen it in its early days when it was an Eisenhower plan. Do you recall whether that is accurate or not?

Gen Wheeler: They had seen it in a very, very sketchy way. What happened was that we were told to have the Joint Staff take a look at this particular plan which was extremely closely held. Up until that time, I think perhaps I was the only member of the Joint Staff, as the Director, who even knew that any such planning operation was in progress under the aegis of the agency. When we did take a look at it we found that we had a tremendous difficulty in getting information out of the agency -- in getting the supporting plan, the logistics, etc., and it was only after the Chiefs had had a chance to look at this that really the logistics were put on -- laid on I should say.

Gen Clifton: In a realistic manner.

Gen Wheeler: That's right -- and the shipping, everything else was beefed

up considerably because the original plan was definitely a shoe string and couldn't have possibly succeeded against any sort of organized resistance at all. Now, I repeat though, that the key assumption upon which the success or failure of this operation rested was the sizeable popular uprising at an early stage and this particular assumption was valid and being correct by agencies over which the Chiefs had no control and, in fact, had no way of making a proper judgment.

Gen Clifton: You didn't have a counter-proposal from your Intelligence Community - the Army, Navy, Air Force had not surveyed the situation?

Gen Wheeler: No, we were getting the usual reports from our military attaches but all this stuff was long out of date as you might expect. There had been and continued to be in Cuba numerous small groups of guerrillas, most of which have since been eradicated by Castro and his people. But everyone - well, let's say it this way, assurances were given that there was the means, the apparatus for this sizeable uprising which would have made the whole thing go. Of course this uprising did not take place. One reason perhaps being the very early defeat of the invasion effort. But in other words, there was no time for the people to react. By the time they really knew about this the thing had been cut to pieces, largely by these two aircraft which was

Gen Clifton: Almost unbelievable.

Gen Wheeler: Almost unbelievable that these two aircraft made all this difference.

Gen Clifton: Now in the March and April period, just to put a perspective on this, I noticed that it tightened up considerably over at the White House, too. The groups got smaller, the meetings were more secret. The one from the NSC level, where it was never discussed that I know of openly, down to a small group, and then I found that because I was doing some Public Relations work along and had too many contacts with the press, I was eliminated from the meetings and I had no opportunity to see whether anybody came from the Joint Staff or not. Although, you had to be aware that something big was brewing. Do you recall whether Gen Lemnitzer or

yourself at that time ever had this as a JCS, you might say item? This Cuban invasion?

Gen Wheeler: I can recall this. I personally never attended one of these meetings at the White House. The first meeting that I went to at the White House on the subject of the Cuban operation was the day it failed. Gen Lemnitzer, of course, went over from time to time but he did not attend all the meetings, I know this for a fact. As I said, certain decisions were taken from time to time wherein he really had no input.

Gen Clifton: Then it never became a formal JCS item in the March, April period that you know of, as Director?

Gen Wheeler: Oh yes, it was discussed, I would say, not only formally but extensively with the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in meetings. Dealing largely, I might add, with logistics. This was the key issue. To try to get the necessary logistic background that would provide the means for these people to get ashore and then support themselves once they got ashore. And then to provide means whereby this popular uprising could be armed and given an opportunity for success. In other words, I would say this, Ted, that this was a very unusual military input, particularly from the JCS level, to an operation. But you've got to remember this was not a military operation. Now I would say this, that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were not involved and could not be held culpable to the degree that these leaks in the Press would imply. On the other hand, anytime that you are involved in any sort of advice to the President on any subject, you have in effect assumed a part of the responsibility for the success or failure of the operation. So, in this regard the Joint Chiefs of Staff were involved.

Gen Clifton: In the months afterwards, as once in awhile President Kennedy would in a soul-searching, almost self analysis conversation, not in a critical way - the one question that came up several times that puzzled him, was if the Joint Chiefs had doubt about the success of this operation, even though it was a "civilian" operation, he said to himself, why didn't one of them step forward, anyone of them, and say this is inadequately planned or an inadequately based thing. Just as you might say, as a friend, if not officially?

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Gen Wheeler: Well, this was the interesting thing about that Ted, and I might add this is a good question. You've got to remember though that the plan as initially conceived, to include the lodgment area, the air support furnished, both as to quantity and as to continuity, were entirely different than what was eventually adopted. I recall having the Joint Staff, supported by the Army Engineers, make a survey of every landing beach in Cuba, to get alternate landing beaches because for political reasons they didn't want to land -- let me say this. The original area was validated as to adequacy of ingress and egress as to its location with regard to the guerrilla activities still going on in Cuba and other necessary things, by a very ^{detailed} analysis conducted by the Joint Staff, assisted by the Army Engineers, because we were not sure when we first saw this plan that this was even the proper place to land. We finally came up with the conclusion that this was the best place, that in this regard the agency had made the proper selection, there was no question about it. However, in all the political hasseling that went on in the ensuing months, the early days of the Kennedy Administration, it was found politically undesirable to do this, and this was where the airfields were. That was the reason for going ashore, among other things, at that particular place.

Gen Clifton: To get the airfields as soon as possible.

Gen Wheeler: That's right. Secondly it was because routes into this area for Castro's forces were, one, easily defensible by the invaders and secondly, the lodgment area was far enough away from Castro forces so it would take a sizeable and pretty long term movement to get these people in there. And thirdly, up in the Escambray, which was just high hills right up from the lodgment area, was where an immediate source of reinforcement could be had and this was not true in the final area which was selected, the Bay of Pigs. We looked at it, said, well, it can be done but it ain't gonna be good. Now you asked why someone of the military didn't step forward and say, this ain't gonna go. I think there were several reasons in my opinion. One, this was not per se a military operation. Two, a member of the Joint Chiefs wasn't always present when these things were going on, and decisions being

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made. In other words, there was no argument or colloquy as to what's wrong with doing this or why can't we cut back on the air support, etc., etc. These decisions were taken without any reference to the military. I may be oversimplifying a lot of this, and I'm sure I am, but as I said earlier, I believe that there was this --- let's say it this way. There was too much of a tendency within the government to go right around the military in dealing with this particular problem, which was regarded as being more of a political problem than a military problem. On the other hand, I must admit that I don't think that the Joint Chiefs of Staff could be completely absolved of any responsibility or blame in the area. I don't think this would be right either. I think there was a lot of fault on both sides, believe you me. And I might add that I was very interested that as a result of Gen Taylor's examination of what went on, that President Kennedy signed this memorandum having to do with the functions of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, ~~the fact that~~ he ordered them not only to lend their advice on military matters but, as men of judgment and experience, on other matters that had an impact on governmental decisions, or words to that effect; plus the fact that he wanted their advice to come to him undiluted and unscreened -- untouched by human hand.

Gen Clifton: This is still hard to accomplish.

Gen Wheeler: Damn hard to accomplish. But, on the other hand the record after that was better, you see. Not good enough but better because the Chiefs, as I told you earlier, were bitter indeed about the fact that military decisions were being taken without the advice of one of the senior military men in the Armed Forces.

d. Clifton Gen Clifton: The Press indicated at the time that President Kennedy had lost confidence in his Chiefs. Outside of the bitterness, was there some feeling in the minds of the Chiefs, and maybe yourself, of losing some of the confidence, temporarily perhaps, in Kennedy and his operation?

Gen Wheeler: I think that there was a strong feeling on the part of people "in the know" around here that the disorganization or lack of organization within the Government was just plain dangerous. In other words, Ted, in

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case of another operation, perhaps of far greater moment than this one, which after all was no great military loss to the U.S., this could be a real serious matter as regards the security of the United States. Secondly, it became quite clear to us -- and when I say us, I'm speaking of the senior military -- that the State Department had greatly overestimated the adverse effects of direct United States involvement in this matter. They were almost pathologically afraid that anything we did was going to bring down the scorn of the opprobrium and the hatred of the whole world. But as a matter of fact, the only thing that it brought down when this thing failed was the fact that everyone sat back and said, "For God's sake, how stupid can those guys be. Why didn't they go ahead and knock that guy off"! They were perfectly prepared to accept this, not only to accept it but to cheer us on.

And thirdly, I think what really shook the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the senior military was the clear evidence of the real lack of intelligence we were able to get as to what went on in Cuba and what the true attitude of the people in Cuba was. In other words, this thing raised deep doubts in the military as to the acumen and ability of other agencies in the Government.

Gen Clifton: I think that was quite evident over at the White House, too. Certainly, by the next steps in regard to CIA and the steps in regard to the State Department.

Gen Wheeler: I'll tell you one other thing, too, Ted, which I referred to earlier. This was the fact that when this rather unseemly thing happened, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were really scornful of the way certain highly-placed individuals ran for the hills, saying, "We had nothing to do with all of this. We advised the President against doing it, and it's all the fault of the Joint Chiefs of Staff." And, as I have already mentioned to you, not one member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, nor did the corporate body, ever attempt to make one rebuttal, but don't think that this didn't burn their souls to a crisp. And, as a result, their opinion of certain people went down to a pretty, pretty, low ebb.

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forward initially and took full responsibility for this which had some mitigating effect on this poison that was being spread around. Do you recall later, after this incident -- May, June, July -- do you recall any time that a civilian stepped forward and defended the Chiefs? or in any way -- then trying to recall if the Secretary of Defense made any speeches.

Gen Wheeler: To the best of my knowledge, Secretary McNamara never said a word in this regard.

Gen Clifton: Now, the next thing that I saw happen, and I'm sort of pinning it on this and it may be false so please correct it, but I saw from where I sat that President Kennedy started hunting for some new bodies, you might say different men. Without condemning any individual, he began to hunt for a livelier approach to our military advisory business. I know that he signed the memorandum which you indicated. Secondly, he did make an effort and directed me to make an effort to see that the Chiefs got over there more often, and that we reiterated that any Chief who wanted to talk to him individually could come if he felt that he couldn't come as part of the corporation. But, did you feel the impact over here on the Joint Staff in the succeeding months, for you were here another eight months, practically, of shuffling of bodies or hunting new people or change in personnel policies or enlarging the staff, etc ---

Gen Wheeler: I would say this, Ted. I think that it was a pretty prevalent feeling among members of the Joint Staff, let's say the echelons below the Joint Chiefs themselves, that there were going to be changes made as the result of all of this. I mean the Joint Staff, and I might add 95 per cent of them didn't know a thing about this operation. They hadn't even heard of it until they read it in the papers. But, ~~as a result of all this,~~ ^{When} and then the usual stuff began to come out in the papers -- the fact that General Taylor was over here making an investigation and so on, this all became known. And, there was a general feeling that there were going to be changes made and in a matter of the not too distant future. Then, I think that generally the Joint Staff accepted ^{the idea} that President Kennedy would slowly but surely get rid